

# On the Road to Communicating With Plain Language

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# Today's Roadmap

- What is plain language, and why is it important?
- 5 things to think about when you write or analyze materials:
  1. Audience
  2. Organization
  3. Words
  4. Language Accuracy
  5. Format
- Handouts and resources
- Questions?



# What Is Plain Language?

Communication that your audience  
or readers can understand  
the first time they hear or read it.



# Why Plain Language?



# The Road to Plain Language

1. Know your audience.
2. Organize for your readers.
3. Use the right words.
4. Check your grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
5. Format for readability.



# 1. Know Your Audience

- Who is your audience? Who is the primary reader? Are there others?
- Why are you writing this document? What is its purpose?
- What does the reader need to know? How can you meet his or her needs?
- How will your reader use this information? How is he or she likely to react?



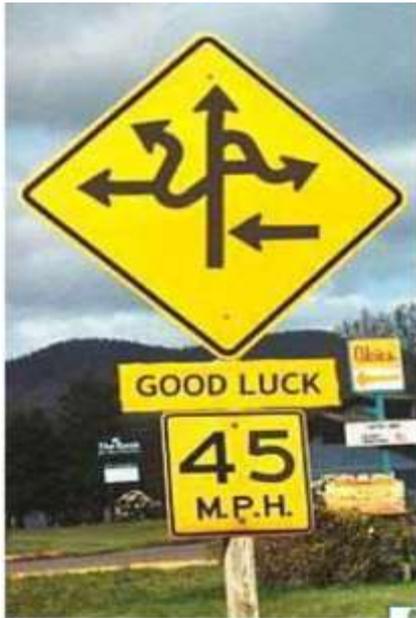
# Practice...



- What does this mean to me?
- Why should I care?
- What do I need to do about it?

## 2. Organize for Your Readers

- Start with the most important information.
- Make the purpose of the document clear.
- Answer questions in the order the reader will ask them.
- **Make sure that readers can quickly and easily find what they're looking for.**
- Use headings and subheadings consistently.



# Tips for Using **Headings**...

- Use subheadings to guide the reader through your document.
- Question headings help the reader find what she needs.
- Action phrases make instructions clear.
- Use the words your readers would use in the headings.
- Make the hierarchy of headings obvious.



### 3. Use the Right Words

- Use the simplest verb tense possible.
- Use short sentences that include only one idea.
- Use short words, and define unfamiliar words and acronyms.
- **Use pronouns (“we” and “you”) to engage the reader.**
- Avoid jargon.
- Omit unnecessary words.
- Use active voice, not passive voice.



# What Is Passive Voice?

## Ask yourself “Who done it?”

In passive voice, the person doing the action usually follows the verb—or is not stated.

*Example:* Arlene was promoted by her boss.

Mistakes were made.

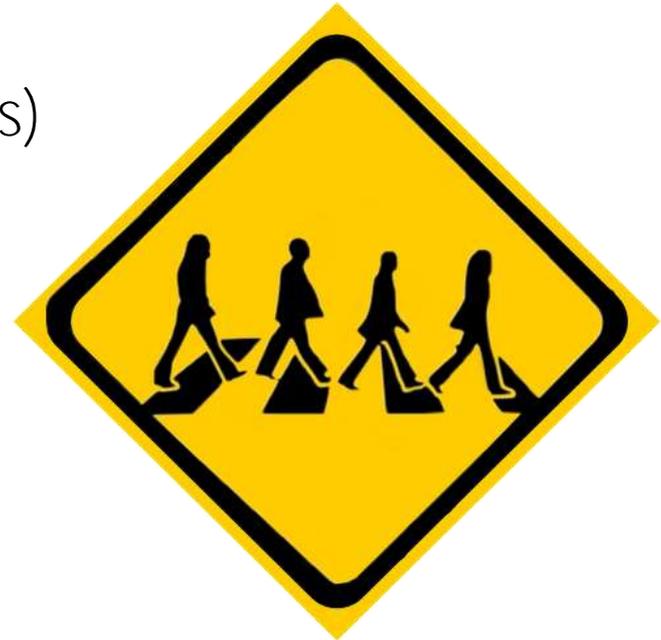
## Look for “be” verbs.

A passive verb has two parts: The verb “to be” **plus** the past-tense form of another verb.

*Example:* The house has been leased by Fred.

# Practice...

- It Was Heard Through the Grapevine by Me (Marvin Gaye)
- You Will Always Be Loved by Me (Whitney Houston)
- My Heart Was Left by Me in San Francisco (Tony Bennett)
- You Are Loved by Her (The Beatles)
- **You Aren't Loved by Him Like**  
You Are Loved by Me  
(Tony Orlando and Dawn)



# Simple Words: What Are Hidden Verbs?

- Conduct an analysis
- Present a report
- Do an assessment
- Provide assistance
- Came to the conclusion
- Analyze
- Report
- Assess
- Help
- Concluded

# Don't Verb Words!



# KISS (Keep It Simple, Sweetheart)

- anticipate
- attempt
- commence
- demonstrate
- implement
- in the event that
- submit
- terminate
- expect
- try
- begin, start
- show, prove
- Start, use
- if
- send, give
- end, cancel

# Dept. of Redundancy Dept.

- ATM machine
- Revert back
- Foreign imports
- Close proximity
- Frozen ice
- Completely destroyed
- Basic fundamentals
- Brief summary
- Depreciate in value
- Exact same
- From whence
- Lag behind
- Free gift
- New innovation
- Plan ahead
- Past history
- True facts
- Visible to the eye
- Final conclusion
- Very unique

## Practice...

*Indigo Cowhide Footwear*

Blue Suede Shoes

*I Strongly Desire to Grasp Your Digits*

I Wanna Hold Your Hand

*What You Covet May Not Always Be Bequeathed to You*

You Can't Always Get What You Want

*I Recite a Miniature Invocation*

I Say A Little Prayer

*Every Instance of Your Inhalations*

Every Breath You Take

# Beware of Jargon

*Now that you're off book, remember how we blocked it. Enter up left, in front of the cyc. Cross down center, but arc the cross. When you get to the hot spot, cheat out, or your comic bit with the prop won't read. And make sure to pick up your cues.*



# WHAT CORPORATE JARGON WOULD YOU LIKE TO ELIMINATE ALTOGETHER?



careerbuilder®

Source: CareerBuilder Q3 2011 Survey; 5300 full-time employees

## 4. Check Your Grammar, Punctuation, and Spelling

- Present your best self—and your organization's.
- Use your resources.
  - Spell check (Be careful!)
  - Editors?
  - A second set of eyes



### I JUDGE YOU WHEN YOU USE POOR GRAMMAR

A COLLECTION OF EGREGIOUS ERRORS, DISCONCERTING  
BLOOPERS, AND OTHER LINGUISTIC SLIP-UPS



SHARON ELIZA NICHOLS

# Why Does It Matter?

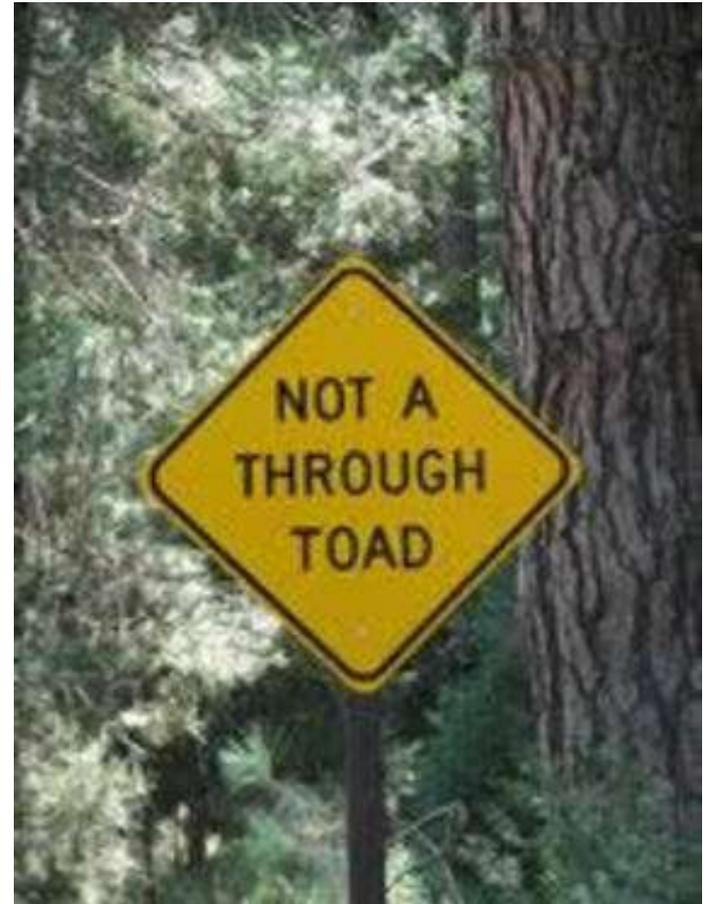
Let's eat, Grandma!

*or*

Let's eat Grandma!

"We are trying to get this problem fix as soon as possible and are really sorry for any incontinence caused, Management."

*--Store's apology for  
broken freezers*



## 5. Format for Readability

- Isolate items on the page to make them stand out.
- Use **“block style”** rather than indented paragraphs.
- Use lots of bulleted lists.
- **Leave the right margin “ragged.”**
- Use bold type for emphasis.
- Use tables for comparisons.



# Which Is Clearer?

We must receive your completed expense form on or before the 15th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you do not submit your form electronically, or the 25th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you submit your form electronically.

When must I send my completed expense form?

<b>If you send your form...</b>	<b>Then we must receive it by...</b>
Electronically	The 25 <sup>th</sup> day of the second month after your trip
Paper or fax	The 15 <sup>th</sup> day of the second month after your trip

# Which Is Clearer?

## When to have the test

Keep having a Pap test every 3 years, depending on your results; or have a Pap test with an HPV test every 5 years, depending on your results. Or you can have a primary HPV test every 3 years, depending on your results (no Pap test needed with this newer test).

## When to have the test

As long as your results are normal, you can:

- Keep having a Pap test every 3 years.
- OR have a Pap test with an HPV test every 5 years.
- OR have a primary HPV test every 3 years. (No Pap test is needed with this newer HPV test.)

# Things To Remember

1. Know your audience.
2. Organize for your readers.
3. Use the right words.
4. Check your grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
5. Format for readability.

# Handouts and Resources

- Plain-language resources handout
- Plain-language checklist



# Questions?



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